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NOTES ON GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Glossy-bellied racer snake *Platyceps ventromaculatus* (Gray, 1834) (Squamata: Serpentes: Colubridae): New locality record in Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), India

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ABSTRACT: This paper extends the distribution of glossy bellied racer (*Platyceps ventromaculatus*) to about 250 km North East straight line aerial distance from its closest known distribution site. (Sikar in Rajasthan) Two live uncollected (1 male, 1 female) sub adults specimens were collected in Delhi NCR (28°38'59" N 77°10'12" E); mensural, meristic and colour pattern data were recorded and the snakes released in the same habitat. It's presence in a developed Metropolis like Delhi NCR may indicate its synurbic abilities.

The glossy-bellied racer (*Platyceps ventromaculatus*) is a species of colubrid snake from south Asia (Smith, 1943; Whitaker and Captain, 2008). It belongs to the Saharo-Sindian racer genus *Platyceps* Blyth, 1860 (Schätti and McCarthy 2001; Schätti and Utiger 2001).This snake is largely terrestrial but sometimes climbs into bushes, buildings, and rocks. (Schätti and Schimtz 2006) As the name suggests, it is a fast active snake that's seldom found in open country and retreats when alarmed. (Daniel 2002) It is also found in the harsh desert habitats (areas around Thar, Rajasthan) where it hibernates during winters and occasionally found in *Euphorbia* clumps. (Whitaker and Captain 2008) This species was first described as *Coluber ventromaculatus* as an illustration in Gray (1834) after a drawing from Major-General Thomas Hardwicke's collection of water-colour sketches of Indian animals in the British Museum (Natural History). Currently two subjective junior synonyms *Coluber cheseni* Martin, 1838 from "Euphrates" (in Mesopotamia) and *Platyceps semifasciatus* Blyth, 1861 from "near Simla" in northern India, are known (Smith, 1943). Blandford (1876) first allocated this species to a different genus - as *Zamenis ventromaculatus*, while Boulenger (1890) misspelt its specific epithet as *Z. ventrimaculatus*. *Platyceps ventromaculatus* is recorded from the Makran coast (Gwadar) in southwest Baluchistan (Pakistan) and the Indus Valley east to the vicinity of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh (India) and as far south as Pune in Maharashtra. (Schätti and Schimtz 2006) Various subsequent authors further recorded it from countries such as Pakistan (Barabanov 2003), United Arab Emirates (Tiedemann 1991). It is known to be common in few areas in Pakistan and as far as across the Indus Valley along the Makran Littoral to the border area of Iran. (Schätti and Schimtz 2006) In India it is common in almost the entire Rajasthan, especially Sikar district the closest location from the current record (About 250 km in straight aerial distance). It is also recorded in Punjab, India and Uttaranchal State. (Schätti and Schimtz 2006) However its presence in the higher altitudes of Uttaranchal is highly debated as the species is a lowland species occurring in altitudes lower than 200 m (Schätti and Schimtz 2006; Whitaker 2006).

In this note, we report the first record of *Platyceps ventromaculatus*, based on two live, uncollected (1 male 1 female) sub-adult specimens from New Delhi, the capital city of India.

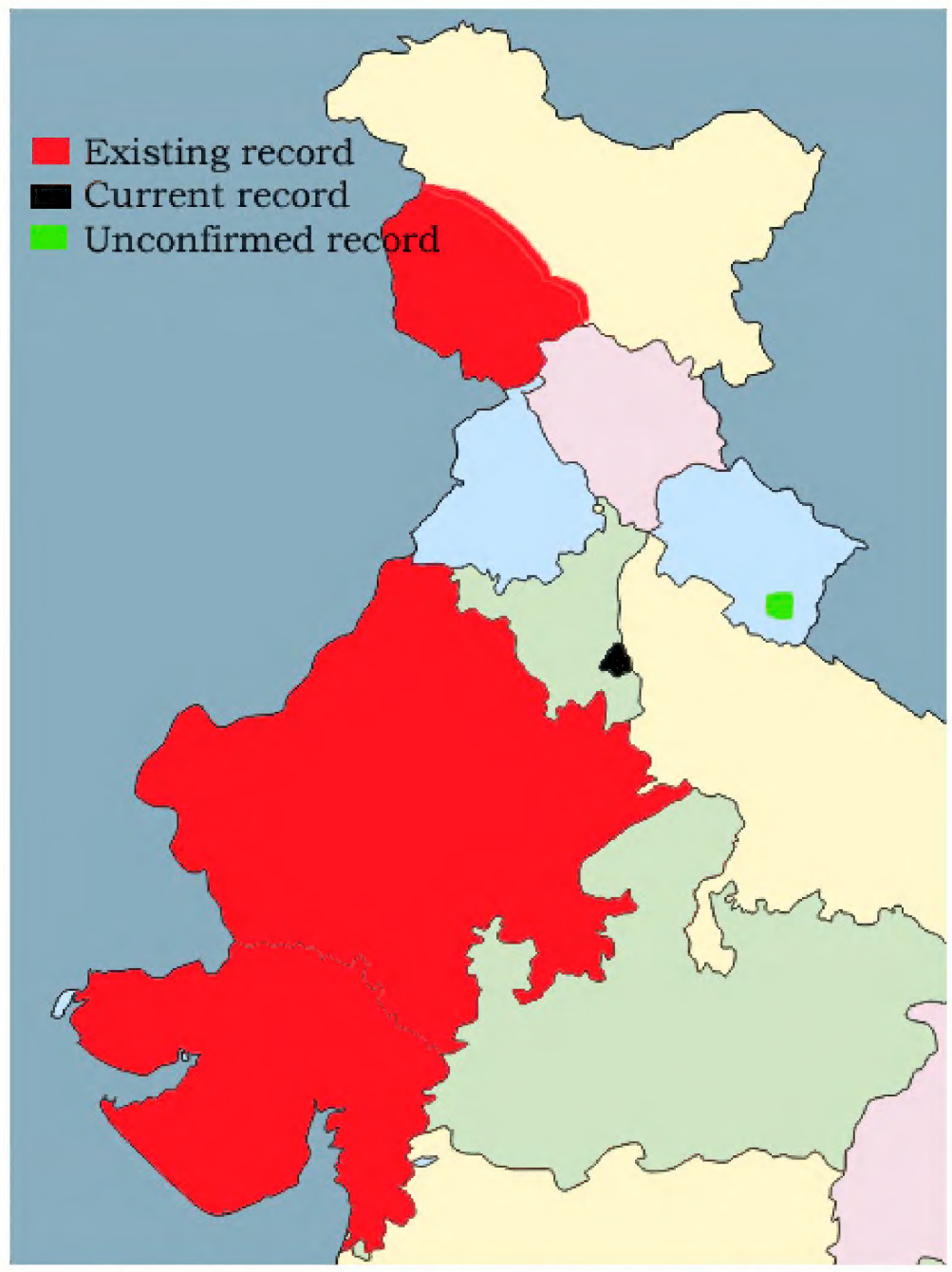

FIGURE 1. Distribution records of *Platyceps ventromaculatus* in the Indian Subcontinent.

Figure 2. Entire body view of Glossy bellied racer snake (*Platyceps ventromaculatus*)

On 26th of March 2011, the Wildlife Rescue Helpline of Wildlife SOS received a call from a locality in West Delhi, Punjabi Basti, Anand Parbhat (28°38'59" N 77°10'12" E) regarding a snake that had entered their premises at around 14:45 h. The rescue coordinator Arshad Alam reached the location to find a snake hiding behind some utensils in a room on the 3rd floor. He safely rescued the snake from the location but not being able to identify safely transferred it to a transport box and brought to the headquarters of Wildlife SOS. On 9th of May 2011, in another rescue call from the same locality at around 10:30 h the police officials rescued a snake from someone's garage and handed over to the rescue coordinator Munish Gautam. The scale clipped by us differentiated these two individuals.

The morphology of New Delhi specimens are as follows: mental wider than long; anterior temporals 2, long and slender; posterior temporals 2; post nasal concave; loreals1, trapezoidal, touches pre-ocular, 2nd, 3rd Supralabial, nasal, prefrontal; preoculars 2, first larger than second; postoculars 3, first touching supraocular and temporal; ventrals 203-207; subcaudals 112-115 pairs; dorsal scale row formula 19 (at neck): 19 (at midbody):13 (near tail); anal scute divided. The scale counts and arrangements are similar to those mentioned in various publications of *Platyceps ventromaculatus* taxonomy. (Schätti and Schimtz, 2006; Whitaker and Captain 2008) Dorsum light brown/grey; dark cross bars more prominent towards head, getting fainter from the latter 2/3 of body to merely black spots till beginning of tail; cross bars formed by aggregation of black coloration on each scale's periphery; dark transverse bands laterally alternate with intervals of dorsal bands; black spots occurred on dorsal part of supra-oculars and one semi-circle with lateral band over parietals; head narrow with protruding snout , distinct from neck with prominent and protruding eyes having round pupils; an oblique black subocular streak on either sides across 5, 6 and 7th supralabials scales; venter pale white with occasional black speckles on the sides; horizontal eye diameter 3.15-3.52 mm; distance from center of eye to posterior border of nostril 5.45- 5.65 mm; Snout–vent length 590-620 mm; tail length 205-225 mm; relative tail-length 0.258-0.265. The maximum total length as described by Whitaker and Captain (2008) being 1020 mm. The total length for males is 1090 mm and females is 1000 mm as detailed by Smith (1943). Based on this, the specimens found in New Delhi appear to be sub-adults. Judging from the relative tail length, the longer specimen with a longer relative tail length is a male whereas the other being female.

Figure 3. General body coloration of *Platyceps ventromaculatus*.

Figure 4. Close up view of *Platyceps ventromaculatus* (Lateral view).

Figure 5. Close up view of *Platyceps ventromaculatus* (Top view).

This species is known from both northern and southern sides of the Indus River. However the sub-specific taxonomic status of this species is still inconsistent due to polymorphism (Khan 1997; Schätti and Schmitz, 2006). Following the current taxonomy (Whitaker and Captain, 2008), our current record of this species in a vast urban metropolis (New Delhi) points out to the presence of potential habitat for snakes even in a developed metropolis. One of our snakes ate a house gecko (*Hemidactylus flaviviridis*) when held in captivity for a short while. Further ecological studies on this snake may point out its ability to use the urban metropolis too for its survival.

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